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E.O. 12356: DECL: OADR

TAGS: PBTS, CO, VE

SUBJECT: VENEZUELAN LEADERSHIP CONCERNED AT GROWING
- TENSION AND RISKS IN THE COLOMBIAN BORDER
- DISPUTE

1. ~~SECRET~~ - ENTIRE TEXT.

2. SUMMARY: FOREIGN MINISTER CONSALVI BRIEFED THE
AMBASSADOR MORNING AUGUST 18 AT THE REQUEST OF PRESIDENT
LUSINCHI ON VENEZUELAN POSITION AND CONCERNS OVER THE
COLOMBIAN BORDER INCIDENT. CONSALVI SAYS HIS
GOVERNMENT IS SERIOUSLY CONCERNED WITH THE POSSIBILITY
OF WAR WITH COLOMBIA OR THE FALL OF VENEZUELAN
DEMOCRACY TO ITS OWN MILITARY. END SUMMARY.

3. CONSALVI CALLED THE AMBASSADOR LATE AT NIGHT ON

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AUGUST 17 TO REQUEST A MEETING. THEY MET AT THE AMBASSADOR'S RESIDENCE FOR BREAKFAST ON AUGUST 18. CONSALVI WAS CLEARLY PREOCCUPIED AND APPARENTLY DID NOT WISH TO DISCUSS ANY OTHER SUBJECTS, EVEN THE UPCOMING MEETING OF THE EIGHT HERE IN CARACAS. CONSALVI SAID THAT THE COLOMBIAN SITUATION WAS MORE SERIOUS THAN IT HAD FIRST APPEARED. AS OF LAST FRIDAY (AUGUST 14) THE VENEZUELAN GOVERNMENT HAD THOUGHT THE ISSUE WAS RESOLVED. COLOMBIA HOWEVER, NOT ONLY DID NOT BACK DOWN BUT MADE THE ISSUE WORSE: COLOMBIA IS INSISTING ON DISPUTING TERRITORY FORMERLY NOT EVEN ON THE TABLE. "THIS IS AN INSULT", HE SAID.

CONSALVI SAID "OUR DEMOCRATIC SYSTEM IS AT STAKE... WE HAVE NEGLECTED MILITARY PREPARATIONS (EQUIPMENT)." VENEZUELA FEELS MILITARILY VULNERABLE IN ITS PETROLEUM INFRASTRUCTURE: "THEY CAN STRIKE AT OUR OIL (FACILITIES CONCENTRATED IN THE MARACAIBO AREA ADJUTING COLOMBIA). WHAT WOULD WE DO -- BOMB THEIR MARIJUANA FIELDS?" GOV LEADERSHIP IS ALSO WORRIED ABOUT THE VENEZUELAN MILITARY AS AN INSTITUTION. "OUR MILITARY QUESTIONS WHY THE CIVIL AUTHORITIES HAVE NOT GIVEN ORDERS TO REPEL THE AGGRESSOR AND DEFEND OUR SOVEREIGNTY... THE VENEZUELAN MILITARY NOW FEELS THAT THERE IS NO ALTERNATIVE TO AN EVENTUAL WAR." COLOMBIA WILL NOT GIVE UP ITS CLAIM WHICH GOV THOUGHT A DEAD ISSUE. IF THE SITUATION IS NOT RESOLVED BY NEGOTIATION OR WAR, THE VENEZUELAN MILITARY WILL "TAKE OVER." (HE SEEMED TO BE TALKING ABOUT A THREAT IN THE MEDIUM TO LONG TERM RATHER THAN IMMEDIATELY.)

5. CONSALVI HAS AN EXAGGERATED FAITH IN THE POWER OF REASON TO SOLVE DISPUTES. THIS IS CLEARLY SHAKEN. HE SEEMS CONVINCED THE ISSUE MAY BE TAKEN OUT OF HIS HANDS AND OUT OF THE HANDS OF THE CIVILIANS. HE FELT HE HAD SOLID ASSURANCES FROM BARCO THAT THIS PROBLEM WOULD BE RESOLVED PEACEFULLY, BUT SUSPECTS THAT THE COLOMBIAN MILITARY MAY BE FORCING THE HAND OF THEIR PRESIDENT.

6. CONSALVI AND HIS GOVERNMENT ARE HURT AND PERHAPS NOT

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A LITTLE STUNNED BY THE FORCE AND MOMENTUM WHICH THIS CRISIS IS ASSUMING. CONSALVI SPENT YEARS BUILDING UP THE GROUP OF EIGHT AND YEARS AS CAP'S FOREIGN MINISTER INCREASING BILATERAL AND MULTILATERAL COOPERATION WITH COLOMBIA. IT MAY BE THAT HE SEES IN THIS CRISIS THE POSSIBLE DISSOLUTION OF CONTADORA, THE GROUP OF EIGHT, AND THE VERY LATIN SOLIDARITY WHICH HE HAS STRUGGLED SO HARD TO ACHIEVE.

7. CONSALVI WAS UNCHARACTERISTICALLY DEROGATORY ABOUT HIS COLOMBIAN COUNTERPART, STATING THAT LONDOND WAS DRUNK AT A MEETING IN BRAZIL AND STOOD CONSALVI UP FOR BREAKFAST ON THE LAST DAY DUE TO HIS LATE NIGHT CAROUSING. CONSALVI, NORMALLY CALM AND REFLECTIVE, WAS VITUPERATIVE ABOUT COLOMBIA'S CLAIM AND ITS ACTIONS, CALLING THEM ABSURD, RIDICULOUS, PREPOSTEROUS. WITH SO MANY SERIOUS BILATERAL ISSUES, HOW CAN COLOMBIA PURSUE THIS? LONDOND IS DUE HERE ON THURSDAY FOR TALKS WHICH WILL CERTAINLY BE DIFFICULT.

8. THE AMBASSADOR EMPHASIZED THE DESIRE OF THE UNITED STATES FOR PEACE AND THE MAINTENANCE OF OUR EXCELLENT RELATIONS WITH BOTH COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA. HE ASKED CONSALVI WHAT HE SHOULD TELL OUR GOVERNMENT. CONSALVI SAID THAT WASHINGTON SHOULD UNDERSTAND THAT "THE GULF OF VENEZUELA," (THROUGH WHICH 70 PERCENT OF VENEZUELA'S OIL MUST PASS,) "IS MORE IMPORTANT TO THE UNITED STATES THAN THE PERSIAN GULF." IT IS OF NO STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE TO COLOMBIA, BUT OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE TO VENEZUELA. HE MADE NO REQUEST FOR SPECIFIC U.S. ACTIONS, BUT IT IS CLEAR THAT THE GOV WANTS US FULLY INFORMED OF THEIR POSITION SHOULD THE SITUATION DEGENERATE FURTHER. REICH

END OF MESSAGE

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